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Alleged KGB recruiter denied visa as Soviet Olympic attache

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Washington — After weeks of pre-games gamesmanship, the Americans accused the Soviets publicly yesterday of trying to run a recruiter for the KGB into Los Angeles as chief Soviet arranger for the Summer Olympic Games in July.

The U.S. response was the diplomatic equivalent of "no way." State Department spokesman John Hughes said Oleg Yermishkin has been denied a visa on "national security grounds."

Beyond that he refused to specify grounds for visa denial. But he did say the administration would be happy to admit anyone "acceptable." For acceptability, he explained, the United States thought the Soviet Olympic attache "should be an Olympic attache."

Another official described Mr. Yermishkin, who used to be in the Soviet Embassy in Washington, as a "notorious recruiter" for the KGB, the Soviet secret police and intelligence service. The problem, he explained, was less any real threat Mr. Yermishkin might pose than "the insult" of his nomination.

The denial has irritated a number of people including, of course, the Soviets. Peter Ueberroth, president of the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, has complained not at the U.S. decision as such but at the delay — until February 28 — in making it.

In fact, Mr. Hughes disclosed, the to and fro between Washington and Moscow began weeks ago. Mr. Yermishkin had been in Washington and Los Angeles in November for preliminary discussions. In December, the Soviets notified the administration informally that he would be their official Olympic attache.

They were told then, Mr. Hughes said, that he was "unacceptable." But February 10 they applied for a six-month visa anyway — one commanding full diplomatic immunity. At that point, a U.S. diplomat recalled, "It was obvious they were doing a job on us, banking on our not wanting to interfere with the Olympics."

Somewhere in the background of all this was a keen awareness of the sensitivity of the Los Angeles area in Soviet-American relations. Downtown is open to Soviet diplomats. Some of the surrounding counties, especially those with important high-technology and defense industries, are not.

Visions of Mr. Yermishkin, with his diplomatic immunity, busily recruiting a spy network danced in American heads. Actually, a U.S. official said, "it was more the symbolism that was bad. You can just sort of see him prowling around followed by a herd of FBI agents."

The upshot was denial of the visa, which the Soviets surely had expected. What happens next depends on whether Moscow is ready to send someone more palatable. Time is growing short, as Mr. Ueberroth pointed out, with other controversies almost certainly ahead and the games scheduled to begin July 28.

Are the Soviets laying the basis for boycotting the games? U.S. officials say they think not. For one thing, Moscow television has arranged for coverage. But they also concede that Soviet leaders probably are still smarting over the U.S. boycott of the 1980 games in Moscow.

President Carter declared the boycott then because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But both governments have showed interest in improving relations recently, and the administration doubts that Moscow favors the deeper chill that would accompany a boycott.

On the other hand, the Soviets have expressed dissatisfaction with some Olympics arrangements. And their actions generally have been noncommittal.

The appearance of known KGB agents in official delegations has often caused brisk debate within U.S. administrations. The FBI doesn't like it. Diplomats have argued that keeping them out is not worth the hassle. Better, they say, to be able to keep an eye on the ones you recognize than the sleepers.

It was suggested to Mr. Hughes yesterday that the United States would have an image problem from barring Mr. Yermishkin.

"Image problem?" he asked rhetorically. If there was an image problem, he said, "it's theirs."